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OUR CRITICS GET PERSONAL

We asked some of our music writers to pick the shows that mean the most to them on the jazz fest's indoor program

T'CHA DUNLEVY

The year was 1986. I was 15 years old, and had been to the Montreal International Jazz Festival a bunch of times, but never to an indoor show. I would roam among the throngs in the streets with my brother or friends, sampling the wild variety of free music on tap.

My brother and I even performed at the jazz fest a few times, kind of. He played saxophone, I played clarinet. We would expand our usual busking grounds to include St-Denis St. during the festival, extracting loose change from pockets with crowd favourites including When the Saints Go Marching In.

One night, finding myself alone, I wandered into Théâtre St-Denis and watched people filter in for a late show by the Wayne Shorter Quartet. I didn't know the saxophonist, who had played with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, Miles Davis and Weather Report (and performs again at this year's festival, June 30 at the Maison symphonique). I just wanted to get inside and see what the fuss was about.

Spotting a guy with a clipboard handing out tickets to people who walked up and gave their names, I asked if he might be able to spare one. "Sorry," he replied. "They're only for people on the list."

A while later, he strolled over and handed me a ticket. I soon found myself sitting dead centre, not more than 10 rows from the front, having my mind expanded by some seriously deep musicianship.

It was my introduction to the other side of the jazz festival — the ticketed shows — a world I would get to know well as a music critic, but never take for granted. There is something unique about indoor shows, which at their best can feel like private moments, stopping time while a world of music plays on at the free stages outside.

Outdoor shows have their own mystique, either of mass congregations around known quantities or the thrill of thousands of people discovering an unknown artist. Wandering the jazz fest site, beer in hand, you can come across amazing stuff several times a night.

It is in that spirit that Montreal Gazette scribes have put down their critic caps to offer you their personal picks for the jazz fest's 36th edition. Here are 15 ticketed shows (and 10 free ones, in a separate rundown by Mark Lepage) that our inner music fans are excited to catch.

AT A GLANCE

The Montreal International Jazz Festival runs from Friday to July 5. For complete program information, visit montrealjazzfest.com.

T'Cha Dunley is expecting sparks when Toronto trio BadBadNotGood meets Wu-Tang Clan legend Ghostface Killah on stage.
SCOTT NEWS / MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

T'CHA DUNLEVY

Theo Croker: (Friday, 9 p.m., L'Astral, 305 Ste-Catherine St. W., $29 to $33.55). Some of my favourite jazz fest moments are taking in new talents for the first time, and this inaugural visit from the 29-year-old trumpeter jumped out of the program as a hot ticket. His third album, Afro Physicist, is a mix of jazz, hip hop and soul, and even includes a Michael Jackson cover (I Can't Help It, featuring Dee Dee Bridgewater).

Erykah Badu: (June 29, 7:50 p.m., Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier, Place des Arts, $93.50 to $118.50). When I first heard Badu's debut single, On and On, in 1996, I wondered who the heck was this woman with the ethereal coo and the laid-back sense of groove. When I first saw her perform, in a pilgrimage to Toronto's Massey Hall, I was blown away by her commanding stage presence. She has become more esoteric over the years, but Badu has never faltered.

BadBadNotGood and Ghostface Killah: (July 4, 8:30 p.m., Metropolis, 59 Ste-Catherine St. E., $33 to $38.25). Wu-Tang Clan crashed the planet in 1993 with the awesomely rugged debut Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers). Members of the legendary crew have released numerous solo albums since, and have staged irregular reunions in varying formations. In 2015, only a few Wu MCs still really bring the heat; Ghostface is one of them. His partnership with Toronto electro-jazz-hop-ensemble BadBadNotGood was as unexpected as it was fruitful. The resulting album, Sour Soul, was just long-listed for the Polaris Music Prize. Expect sparks to fly when their worlds collide on stage.

JORDAN ZIVITZ

Steven Wilson: (June 27 and 28, 8:30 p.m., Metropolis, $42 to $67.20; June 27 show is sold out). When I first saw Porcupine Tree in 2002, it was clear Wilson's art-rock ambitions wouldn't be contained by a small stage for long. They couldn't be contained by his most popular project, either. I'd love to see Porcupine Tree break its hiatus, but can't imagine it topping Wilson's new album, Hand. Cannot. Erase., a deeply affecting character study that makes full use of his sprawling influences.

Steven Wilson

My Brightest Diamond: (June 27, 10 p.m., Club Soda, 1225 St-Laurent Blvd., $32 to $34). I discovered Shara Worden's gift for high fantasy when she lent her deep velvet vocals to the role of a diabolical forest queen on the Decemberists' 2009 rock opera The Hazards of Love. Her own music occupies an even more rarefied realm, with the studio treated as a toy chest for four-minute symphonies. It should be a thrill to see how she treats the stage.

Nels Cline and Julian Lage: (July 1, 10:30 p.m., Gesù — Centre de créativité, 1200 Bleury St., $42 to $49.35). My love of Wilco deepened once Cline joined in 2004 and magnified their experimental streak; and my love of Cline deepened upon investigation of his bottomless catalogue. His delicate but unpredictable guitar duets with Lage, a young associate of vibraphonist Gary Burton, show an entirely different side to the voracious collaborator's work than his spiked interplay with Jeff Tweedy.

BERNARD PERUSSE

Whitehorse: (June 28, 10 p.m., Club Soda, $30 to $31.50). I had enjoyed what I heard of Whitehorse, but nothing had really prepared me for Melissa McClelland and Luke Doucet's glorious storm of sound, which I first heard live during the Montréal en lumière festival in February. The beautiful, twangy, full-bodied noise only two people can make? Only four months later, I'm desperate to hear it again.

Huey Lewis and the News: (July 1, 7:30 p.m., Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier, Place des Arts, $88.50 to $128.50). I first saw Huey Lewis and the News at the defunct Club Monteal in 1980, when they had only one great album and no hits. It was a wonderful, rocking show and I became an instant fanatic, but no one could have predicted the massive chart success that was about three years in the future. On this rare Montreal visit, they'll revive all the favourites, plus other soul and R&B-influenced gems from their catalogue.

Huey Lewis

Pokey LaFarge: (July 4, 6 p.m., Club Soda, $32 to $34). Looking as if he stepped out of a 1940s juke-joint photo, LaFarge opened for Jack White at the Olympia in 2012, and I watched him win over a noisy crowd of hipsters who hadn't seemed in the mood for an unplugged blend of Western swing, country, ragtime and blues. I can only imagine what he'll do as a headliner in front of people who are already on his side.

PETER HADEKEL

Avishai Cohen

Avishai Cohen with Renee Rosnes: (Friday, 6 p.m., Gesù — Centre de créativité, $42 to $49.35). The Israeli bassist is a citizen of the world, as comfortable with Latin beats and rock riffs as he is with the musical charms of the Middle East. Together with the radiant brilliance of Rosnes on piano, you can expect this unscripted encounter to go just about anywhere.

John Scofield / Joe Lovano Quartet: (June 29, 8 p.m., Théâtre Maisonneuve, Place des Arts, $52 to $62). Your basic dream quartet with Scofield's dirty guitar, Lovano's bopping tenor sax and a killin' rhythm section of Larry Grenadier on bass and Bill Stewart on drums. We've been counting the years since Sco and Lo last played the jazz fest together, in 1999.

Russell Malone: (July 2 and 3, 7 and 9:45 p.m., Upstairs Jazz Bar and Grill, 1254 Mackay St., $41.95). Silky smooth doesn't even start to define the warm, relaxed sound that Malone projects on guitar. We got to know him as a melodic foil for Diana Krall, but this guy brings it all as a leader, and we get to hear him in the friendly confines of Upstairs.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Enrico Rava Quintet: (June 27, 8 p.m., Monument National, 1182 St-Laurent Blvd., $34 to $50.90). Italy is synonymous with style, yet I was unaware of its vibrantly original jazz scene until I attended the 2001 Orvieto Jazz Festival. Its godfather is trumpeter Rava, a cool-daddy sennalist who goes from mournful wails to krazy-kat flutters without a hiccup. Protégés and bandmates Gianluca Petrella (trombone wizardry) and Giovanni Guidi (piano per ferza) also perform a duet. Ah, like a night in Rome ...

Stephen Barry Band: (June 28, 6 p.m., L'Astral, $25 to $29). As comfortable as an old pair of shoes, the local band celebrates its 40th anniversary. Astonishing, really; hell, most pop singers are washed up by 40. But an idiosyncratic repertoire of blues-oriented songs — the kind that make you ask, "Where did that come from?" — propels Barry's pliant bass thud and guitarist Andrew Cowan's fine filigree. Barry's singing is laconically conversational, as if you bumped into him in Mile End. The intimate L'Astral is guaranteed to glow.

Christine Jensen Quartet featuring Ben Monder: (July 2, 9:30 p.m., Dièse Onze, 4115-A St-Denis St., $15). Composer and saxophonist Jensen is the local musician I follow most avidly as she racks up kudos internationally. Here she follows up her previous night's outdoor performances with the Orchestre National de Jazz de Montréal, which she co-founded, in a more intimate meeting with inventive post-Metheny guitarist Monder. Her compositional prowess sometimes overshadows her beautifully serpentine sorties. I'm looking forward to her intertwining with Monder's spacious sonic nuances.

Juan Rodriguez follows composer and saxophonist Christine Jensen more avidly than he does any other local musician.
MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

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